



# A Citizen for All Seasons? The Promises and Perils of a Trans-Ideological Vision of Civic Empowerment

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## **A Citizen for All Seasons? The Promises and Perils of a Trans-Ideological Vision of Civic Empowerment**

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I am grateful to the North American Society for Social Philosophy both for the book award itself, which is a true honor, and also for the opportunity to engage first in person and now in print with Zachary Hoskins, Krista Thomason, and David Leichter's thoughtful comments. I am especially grateful to Hoskins, Thomason, and Leichter in their roles as the Book Award Committee for their careful and sympathetic reading of *No Citizen Left Behind*. Before I plunge into their commentary, however, I imagine it would help readers if I provide a brief account of the main aims and arguments of the book.

*No Citizen Left Behind* argues that the United States suffers from a *civic empowerment gap* that is predictable, pervasive, shameful, and avoidable. Political scientists and other researchers have demonstrated conclusively, for decades, that citizens who are well-educated, middle-class or wealthy, and white are systematically more civically and politically empowered than are citizens who are less well-educated, working class or poor, and non-white. More privileged citizens have higher levels of civic and political knowledge and skills. They have more empowering civic and political attitudes, such as beliefs in their own efficacy and a positive sense of civic identity. They participate at much higher rates in virtually all forms of offline and online civic and political action, from voting to protesting, volunteering to offering public testimony, serving on boards to knocking on doors, contacting elected officials to coordinating with others to address a collective problem. Finally, they have far greater levels of impact; their opinions are heard and their interests are realized at levels disproportionate even to their level of engagement. Although these disparities have been well-documented for decades, they have also been treated as inevitable, even natural, and as such have failed to generate generalized normative outrage. I argue that this fatalism is both empirically unjustified—there are many ways to shrink the civic empowerment gap—and normatively inexcusable, since it is fundamentally antidemocratic to be able to predict citizens' civic and political participation and power based on their demographic characteristics alone.

I started working on this book when I was teaching eighth grade in the Atlanta and then Boston Public Schools. (I completed my doctorate in political theory before I became a teacher, and returned to academia as a professor after eight years as a schoolteacher.) During these years, I was struck by the shift—exemplified by the impressively ambitious although fundamentally flawed “No Child Left Behind” education legislation—in the United States' approach to the academic achievement gap: in other words, to the gap in academic performance between White, Asian, middle-class, and native English speaking students, on the one hand, and Black, Hispanic, poor, and English language learner students on the other. Even when I started teaching, in 1996, it was fairly common to hear educators and policymakers locate the causes of and responsibilities for the academic achievement gap in the bodies of children and adults themselves: “These kids are too busy listening to rap to pay attention in school. No one reads to them; they don't even have any books at home. Their heads are full of basketball and girls; what do you expect?”

They're working three jobs; they don't have time for homework. Those parents just don't value education." By the time I stopped teaching eighth grade, in 2006, those explanations had (at least officially) disappeared. Schools, school districts, and the state as a whole had assumed collective responsibility for eliminating the academic achievement gap. The fact that the average black twelfth grader read at the same level as the average white eighth grader was a national disgrace for which we were normatively accountable. The problem did not lie in the bodies of children and parents; rather, it lay in schools and districts, in state education policies, and in society as a whole. The academic achievement gap had shifted from a merely descriptive to a normatively-laden phenomenon, and from an individual to a collective responsibility.

My goal in *No Citizen Left Behind* is to provoke the same normative shift around the civic empowerment gap, and to explain how schools—especially *de facto* segregated schools serving low-income students of color—can and should reshape their practices to help reduce the civic empowerment gap. To that end, I critically examine and make recommendations about history and social studies instruction, civic identity construction, school culture, pedagogical practices, service learning, action civics, standardized curriculum and assessment policies, and other topics. In so doing, I draw upon my own experiences as an urban middle school teacher, on primary and secondary social science data (including original interviews, textbook analyses, census data, and syntheses of various social scientific literatures), and on normative political theory. Each chapter weaves together narrative, empirical analysis, and normative theorizing in what I admit is a “methodologically eclectic” mix. Each chapter also tries to make a simultaneous contribution to normative theory, public policy, and educational practice.

With that as a bit of background, let me now turn to Hoskins' commentary, which mostly advances arguments that I myself affirm in the book. Hoskins notes (as does Thomason) that white and other privileged students also need a better civic education than they currently receive. I absolutely agree; this is one reason that I talk about civic *empowerment* rather than civic *achievement*—and also why I concentrate on the relative *gap* rather than on *absolute* levels of civic engagement. It would be good if all students learned to be better citizens and had more empowering civic learning experiences in and out of schools; it's even more important, though, that those who currently suffer at the bottom of the civic empowerment gap receive such opportunities. I also agree with Hoskins that it would be better if members of dominant groups learned to overlook normatively irrelevant differences and to take multiple perspectives, thus saving students from historically marginalized communities from needing to learn to codeswitch. But as I argue in the book, even though learning to codeswitch unfairly imposes unequal burdens and risks reifying dominant perspectives, it is also a practical necessity for members of non-dominant groups to combat the civic empowerment gap.

Hoskins also raises some critical questions about microaggressions. I want to clarify that although I build on theories of racial microaggressions, I do so in order to develop my argument that schools enact *civic* microaggressions against students. These microaggressions often also occur in an ethnoracialized context, and hence constitute racial microaggressions as well, but it is their civic nature that I am interested in. In this respect, I agree with Hoskins that White students can and do also experience civic microaggressions, even if far less frequently than those experienced in *de facto* segregated schools serving low-income students of color.

More importantly, however, Hoskins questions my claim that these policies are rightly understood as microaggressions at all. He points out, rightly, that the state controls citizens' behaviors and bodies in all sorts of ways, so why denounce similar controls over children in schools? I fully grant that we don't live in an "anything goes" culture or society, nor would we want to. But to point out that democratic states regulate adults' behaviors in some ways, in some spheres, does not contradict my point that schools' *pervasive, intrusive, and excessive* regulations over children's behaviors are appropriately understood and experienced as civic microaggressions.

In the book, I mostly gave examples from Walden and McCormack, the two schools in which I taught in Atlanta and Boston. It may help to consider examples from literally hundreds of "no excuses" elementary and middle urban charter schools in the United States, to understand their assertions of control over students' bodies every minute of the school day. In many such schools, which almost exclusively serve low-income children of color, students are mandated any time they are not writing or reading to sit in "star position:" forearms laid across the desk, hands pressed palms together. They are assigned demerits if they are slumping, if their legs are stretched out, or if their eyes are failing to "track the speaker." Hands pressed to their thighs, palms open and flat, students move from one class to another silently along a colored line painted on the floor. If they enact these behaviors with sufficient consistency, students are rewarded on occasion with the opportunity to talk in low voices at lunch, although silent lunch (in some schools, while mandatorily reading a book) is more often the norm. Recess is non-existent, given the "urgency" of instructional time.

I find it hard to imagine how this kind of all-consuming control is anything other than aggressive (although perhaps calling these "micro" aggressions is a mistake: it's hard to see these as small in any way). Furthermore, the fact that these practices are enacted almost exclusively with low-income children of color does suggest a particularly nasty form of civic disrespect—one that not incidentally also infects many low-income and non-white neighborhoods, where representatives of the state also exert invasive, pervasive, and excessive controls over *adults'* movements and behaviors. I absolutely agree with Hoskins that a "balance" of freedom and control is needed, but that is not what currently exists in many urban schools or communities.

More generally regarding balance, I am frankly baffled by Hoskins' apparent belief that I rigidly view "as insufficient any form of engagement that is less than fully authentic." In particular, he seems to attribute to me the belief that "If we want our children to learn to govern themselves, then we must let them govern themselves." But I never argue in favor of unfettered student self-governance—and as Hoskins himself notes, I approvingly offer a number of examples of simulated engagement. I even go so far as to offer a continuum of civic experiences in schools (see Figure 1), arguing that even the "minimal" end of the continuum would be an achievement in many schools serving low-income kids of color. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, I have the feeling that Hoskins ignores the authenticity inherent in many in-school activities: debating a contentious and complex topic; organizing an after-school manga club; or asserting one's own perspective respectfully but insistently during a classroom discussion. As students gain the opportunity not only to participate in but also to initiate and lead such interactions, they are benefiting from fully "authentic" experiences of giving and receiving civic respect, skills, and knowledge—without being turned loose such that the inmates are running the asylum.

## INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Turning to Thomason and Leichter, I want to start by noting an interesting tension in their responses: Thomason pushes for me to embrace classic Rawlsian liberalism—and in particular, the ideal of public reason—more fully, while Leichter argues that I should go even further in “challenging impartiality and neutrality.”

This is a particular instance of a general phenomenon around *No Citizen Left Behind*, where people from disparate political and ideological perspectives all embrace the book but then try to push it somewhat closer to their own position. For the most part, I’m thrilled about this, as it signals the success of what I might retrospectively identify as the “theory of change” of the book: that by providing a continuum of ideas and proposals, it can both help people find common ground, and at the same time provide a road map for how people might take further actions. If Leichter uses ideas from *No Citizen Left Behind* to develop arguments that “a fully empowering education” should enable students and teachers “to create alternative forms of protest and action that challenge and change current opportunities for political agency,” while Thomason uses it to recreate public reason as an anti-oppressive and challenging perspective-taking exercise that requires people in privileged positions to take on viewpoints from the margins, I’m totally happy. Not only do I happen to think that both proposals would engender some powerful civic learning, but I also feel encouraged that these theoretically divergent positions demonstrate *No Citizen Left Behind*’s potential to spur philosophical innovations, not just pedagogical ones.

In this respect, I embrace a firmly pragmatist philosophy. I mean this in two senses. First, I want to move people *toward* justice, and I believe in pursuing this goal even at the expense of building a movement to work toward a fully just world. I’m wary of the failure that can come with pursuing the great; as a passionate and even “proud incrementalist” (Levinson 2013, 668), I am willing to settle for the good. Second, I care about the actions on the ground more than I care about the principles that drive those actions. While Thomason and Leichter may embrace somewhat different theoretical and principled frameworks, their pedagogical proposals are aligned with the goals and practices of shrinking the civic empowerment gap (and do not violate other basic principles of liberty, democracy, or equality). That is what matters to me. I would prefer to unite people from different philosophical persuasions around an important common task than to convince one faction or another that its philosophical persuasions themselves are in some way misdirected. In this respect, Thomason may be right that I’m more of a Rawlsian than I myself recognize, at least insofar as I embrace some form of overlapping consensus.

At the same time, I harbor some concerns about both Thomason’s and Leichter’s responses. Let me explain why in turn, beginning with Thomason.

To begin with, I think that Thomason’s argument about using public reason to “get students and citizens alike to see the world through eyes that aren’t their own” is potentially right but profoundly anti-Rawlsian. She argues that democratic citizens need to develop a democratic civic *identity* as the “sort of person who engages in public reason.” Her proposal is to teach children that democracy—and by extension, their civic identity as someone who supports democracy—“is what allows me to live in a world where I can decide what I value in the first

place.” By elevating the value of autonomy—of choosing and revising one’s own conception of the good, rather than merely having the space in which freely to live according to an inherited or unchosen conception of the good life—Thomason moves quickly and firmly from political to comprehensive liberalism. She then reinforces this move by emphasizing how “helping students see their own conceptions of the good as revisable” can promote the kind of openness to multiple perspectives that I argue (and she agrees) is necessary for closing the civic empowerment gap.

I basically agree that learning to see one’s own conceptions of the good as revisable is one really terrific way to be both motivated and enabled to take other people’s perspectives. I also agree that this embrace of autonomy is central to the liberal project, including the liberal political project. In my first book, *The Demands of Liberal Education*, I argued that liberal political principles rest on the value of adults’ ability to exercise autonomy; a corollary of this, I argued, is that liberal states have an obligation to help children develop their capacities for autonomy. In that book, I also argued that even if states try to provide merely a liberal civic education, but not an autonomy-promoting education, they will end up fostering students’ development of the capacity for autonomy. Hence, I concluded, on both principled and practical grounds, effective liberal states should and will educate for autonomy. In these respects, I am utterly on board with Thomason’s suggestions. However, I think that these arguments are anathema to Rawlsian political liberals. If the point of political liberalism is to argue (wrongly) that a core commitment to the value of autonomy is *not* at the heart of the liberal project, then Thomason’s reinterpretation of education for public reason as education for autonomy just can’t fly within a political liberal—i.e. Rawlsian—framework.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, although I do support Thomason’s call for (what I interpret as) an autonomy-promoting education, I’m not convinced that learning to embrace multiple conceptions of the good fosters the kind of perspective-taking needed to reduce the civic empowerment gap. This is a case of Thomason’s proposing the right solution to the wrong problem—and the wrong solution to the problem at hand. This is because the kind of perspective-taking needed to reduce the civic empowerment gap is that which fosters mutual understanding about the *means* more so than about the *ends*. Minority civic disempowerment often arises not because they have different conceptions of the good, but because they have an understanding of the obstacles and opportunities needed to achieve a *common* conception of the good (say, economic stability, a middle-class life in a safe neighborhood) that is challenged by others who think they are engaged in “special pleading.”

I talk in *No Citizen Left Behind* about three ways in which this happens. First, “members of the majority group may live by certain norms, or benefit from experiences of the world, that they

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<sup>1</sup> I should also note that I think Thomason gets the basis of public reason a bit wrong, insofar as she claims that public reasons “have to be compelling not because they appeal to my specific conception of a good life, but by appealing [to] me as a citizen who can have *any* reasonable conception of a good life.” The idea of the overlapping consensus is that public reasons can absolutely appeal to people from within their own perspectives and beliefs, but that this will happen within every reasonable conception of the good. As she later (in footnote 3) quotes Rawls saying, “Citizens affirm the ideal of public reason, not as a result of political compromise...but from within their own reasonable doctrines.”

deny when these are articulated by members of minority communities” (p. 79). Second, “differences in life experience...lead members of different ethnoracial groups to ‘read’ the world in different ways” (pp. 75-76); majority group members then reject alternative readings as bizarre or crazy. Third, in order to show “respect” for minority groups’ viewpoints, members of majority groups may often “reinterpret what minorities say in order to make minorities’ claims make sense to them....‘What you’re really trying to say is...’” (p. 80). All of these may lead to majority group members’ failing to hear, understand, and/or accept public policy arguments made by minority group members about how best to achieve a common conception of the good.

I am hence also somewhat skeptical about the association that Thomason draws between teaching privileged students that their positions are determined by luck and teaching them to see their conceptions of the good as revisable. I understand the urge to teach privileged students to reject the ideology of meritocracy in favor of an ethic of luck egalitarianism or something of the sort. But I worry that this paradoxically reinforces existing hierarchies because while the *genesis* of the ordering may now be seen as luck rather than merit, the *legitimacy* of the hierarchy itself remains unchallenged. It’s not that we want privileged students to shift from thinking, “I am superior because I worked hard” to “I am superior because I’m lucky.”<sup>2</sup> Rather, I want students to open up to the idea that they *aren’t* superior—that their understandings of and ways of being in the world are as contingent, open to challenge, and even odd as those “diverse” others whom they see as “other.” This is what I mean in *No Citizen Left Behind* when I talk about teaching privileged students to adopt a Du Boisian double consciousness. I don’t want them to be merely grateful for having ended up where they are in life. Rather, I want them to feel radically unsure about whether where they’ve ended up in life is where *anyone* should be. This is admittedly related to thinking of one’s own position as revisable. But it’s not about revising a conception of the good, exactly, and it’s definitely not about simply learning that one is “lucky.”

To this end, I’m ambivalent about Thomason’s critique of the kind of perspective-taking that she calls “the wrong kind of agreement”: namely, that which involves changing one’s perspective about what it means to have one’s own identity, but not actually trying on a new identity. She gives the example of men who shift from believing that “real men” assert physical control over others to believing that “‘real men’ would never hit women,” but who don’t take on a female viewpoint. But I think this transformation within male identity is exactly the kind of imaginative capaciousness that we seek in a civic context: to move from overcome the belief that it is “us versus them” and instead to embrace a more inclusive “we.” Consider the unprecedentedly speedy shift in state marriage laws, due in part to an equally speedy shift from the language of “gay” or even “same-sex” marriage to “marriage equality.” Is this so bad, to overcome the othering relationship (gay vs. straight marriage) in favor of a common humanity (marriage, full stop)?

Let me use this question to segue into Leichter’s commentary, since he also focuses on identity and civic solidarity. Leichter suggests that *No Citizen Left Behind* implicitly invokes, or at least could plausibly rest upon, an expansive, Arendtian notion of solidarity “that potentially cut[s] across groups” and enables new “possibilities for acting in concert with one another.” I really

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<sup>2</sup> I’m also a bit concerned because Scott Seider’s (2008a, 2008b) research suggests that even well-designed social justice education with affluent students can lead these students defensively to embrace meritocracy with even greater passion than before.

appreciate this suggestion. In particular, I am enthusiastic about a notion of solidarity that arises from “shared commitment” and “concerted action,” rather than being thought to precede them. As I discuss in Chapter 6, on action civics, the empirical political science, political and social psychology, and sociology literature also certainly suggest that identity is often built from engagement rather than motivating it. I also appreciate his account of “civic relationships,” which can also be seen as forms of imaginative action that can give rise to new identities, including solidaristic affiliations.

Furthermore, I think Leichter’s call for an “account of the ways that various civic movements might be able to link together” and “construct coalitions” for non-exclusionary action usefully aligns with nascent interactions among scholars and activists from the worlds of community organizing, democratic theory and practice, civic engagement, and civic education. This was one aim of *No Citizen Left Behind*, to bring together research and practice from these shockingly distinct literatures, traditions, and knowledge bases.<sup>3</sup> I feel good about the extent to which it did so, but I also agree that the book was able to be only so expansive, and that theorists like Arendt, as well as empirical studies especially of transformative organizing approaches,<sup>4</sup> are welcome additions.

I am ambivalent, however, about Leichter’s push for a counter-ideological civic education. Leichter argues that “civic education needs to highlight both the structural dimension of oppression and the role that the dominant group plays in projecting an ideological discourse in which ethnoracial minorities are portrayed in negative ways.” He follows this up with specific suggestions, including that action civics “address the role that markets and ideology play in transforming and distorting possibilities for collective political action,” that “traditional avenues for political action” be examined to uncover “the hidden interests that they promote and whose interests they devalue,” and that students and teachers be enabled “to create alternative forms of protest and action that challenge and change current opportunities for political agency.”

On the one hand, as I mentioned earlier, I welcome these suggestions as highly appealing extensions of my arguments about how ambitious civic pedagogies can help combat the civic empowerment gap. I don’t think that these are *essential* extensions of action civics, but they are absolutely compatible with the continuum of engagement that I propose. I would love to see versions of this work happening in classrooms led by ambitious, thoughtful teachers and students.

On the other hand, I am concerned that Leichter too readily overlooks how such approaches could be deployed across the political and ideological spectrum. Thanks to recent Supreme Court decisions, “current opportunities for political agency” now include the empowerment of corporations as political and religious agents, and the removal of virtually all restrictions on using personal or corporate money to engage in political organizing, expression, and action. Media outlets also have the “opportunity” to exercise “political agency” by exposing a putatively “dominant group” of secularists, liberals, Jews, and gays with “hidden interests” in destroying

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<sup>3</sup> In so doing, I am indebted to Peter Levine and Karol Soltan for their work fostering a broader field of “civic studies.” See Levine 2013 and Boyte et al 2007.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g. Han 2014.



America by “projecting an ideological discourse” in which embattled Christians, patriots, and conservatives “are portrayed in negative ways.” I assume that Leichter would be appalled if his recommendations were used in public schools to justify creative forays into enhancing corporate activism and unmasking of a secular, anti-Christian agenda—but this is perfectly compatible with his proposals for more “radical” civic pedagogies. Ideology can be unmasked in more than one direction.

Hence, I return full circle to an impassioned but non-radical pragmatism—one that challenges “liberal notions of impartiality, neutrality, and universality” but does not necessarily overthrow basic liberal democratic ideology. I am hopeful that in doing so, *No Citizen Left Behind* will nonetheless contribute to advances in theory, policy, and pedagogy that bring about a more just civic order.

**Figure 1: Continua of Civic Experiences in Schools** (Levinson 2012, p. 189)

<u>How schools construct civic experiences (pedagogies)</u>			
<i>minimal</i>			<i>maximal</i>
(a) reactive and sporadic	→		intentional, consistent, comprehensive
(b) invisible, under the radar	→		transparent; visible to students and adults alike
(c) simulated	→		authentic
(d) specific, isolated, unreflective	→		generalizable, with explicit teaching for transfer
<u>What students learn via civic experiences (aims)</u>			
<i>minimal</i>			<i>maximal</i>
(e) power of individual	→		power of collective action
(f) value of participation	→		value of creating change through leadership
(g) that they have remediable deficits	→		how to leverage their capacities and build on their strengths; that they are potential able contributors

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